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U.S. aid pipeline to Afghan rebels springing leaks

By Terry Atlas

WASHINGTON—Five years after Soviet airborne troops swooped into Afghanistan, Congress has pumped up secret aid to the Afghan resistance fighters, making it the largest covert aid program since the Vietnam War.

But there are questions about how much of that money is reaching the anti-Soviet Afghan rebels and about what the U.S. is trying to achieve with its mushrooming financial support of the resistance fighters.

In contrast to the uproar over American aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, Congress has quietly pushed the administration to increase U.S. support for what President Reagan has called the "noble struggle" of the Afghans against Soviet invaders. American assistance, said Rep. Charles Wilson (D., Tex.), has been "substantial but not enough."

There is a bipartisan consensus in Congress that this is America's "good" secret war—one without the moral ambiguities of Nicaragua—in which the U.S. has a clear moral duty and geopolitical interest in supporting the Afghans fighting the Soviet-supported government in Kabul.

"It is a very, very compelling human situation and a very, very important geopolitical situation," said conservative Sen. Gordon Humphrey (R., N.H.). Said liberal Sen. Paul Simon (D., Ill.): "We're trying to help people invaded by a foreign power, and that is a very different situation [from Nicaragua]."

But the administration is worried that American aid is growing too quickly and could lead to a further Soviet expansion of the war that might spill over the border into Pakistan, the key U.S. ally in the region and supply conduit to the rebel fighters.

Congress has earmarked \$250 million this year to buy weapons, food, medicine and clothing for the more than 200,000 Moslem Afghan tribesmen fighting to oust 115,000 better-armed Soviet troops. The amount is more than double what the administration had requested and almost 20 times the aid that the White House is seeking for the Nicaraguan rebels in the current fiscal year.

Some advocates of the Afghan cause, both in and out of Congress, fear that much of this money will be lost to corruption, waste and the high costs of operating a secret supply network stretching from Washington halfway around the world. What gets through, they charge, isn't enough to avoid the eventual defeat of the resistance.

"I'm told that from 20 percent to 80 percent of the American military aid doesn't get through," said Humphrey, whose newly formed Senate task force on Afghanistan plans hearings this spring on the problems of military and humanitarian aid for the Afghan fighters and refugees.

"It's scandalous both in terms of waste of money and, even greater, in the waste of human life and the opportunity to aid freedom," he said in an interview.

How much American aid is being lost in the CIA's supply pipeline isn't publicly known, because the administration doesn't even admit that military assistance to the Afghan resistance.

Discussion of American efforts to help the Afghans took place, until recently, largely behind the closed doors of congressional intelligence committees while Soviet bombing devastated much of the country and sent 3 million Afghans fleeing to refugee camps in neighboring Pakistan and Iran.

But it is now being talked about openly by some of those advocating a greater American role on behalf of the Afghan resistance. They say there has been enough funding to sustain the fight but not enough to force the Soviets to withdraw.

Matthew Erulkar, a lobbyist for the Afghan rebels and director of the Afghan American Educational Fund, said the U.S. has spent \$380 million to \$400 million on behalf of the resistance since 1979, most in the last two years. Of that, he estimates only about \$100 million in weapons and other military hardware reached the fighters—and a third of that was in the form of weapons that were old, in poor condition and plagued by a high failure rate.

"We're sending hundreds of millions of dollars and at the other end people don't have shoes and maps," one Senate investigator said. "Anybody can figure it out that the money just isn't getting through."

Contradicting that view, Michael Armacost, assistant secretary of state for political affairs, recently said the fact that the rebels have fought Soviet troops to a stalemate on the ground and increased their downing of Soviet aircraft is proof that the U.S. is doing "what we

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consider appropriate and necessary" to help the Afghan resistance.

"Their armament has improved from traditional homemade rifles through nearly the full range of Soviet weaponry," said a recent State Department report.

To explain that, the State Department stands by the rebels' claims that most of their weapons are captured from Soviet troops, turned over by Afghan army defectors, or bought on the open market. "We haven't seen any evidence of Americans," said Dr. Khalid Akram, a physician and member of one of the resistance groups who is in the U.S. raising humanitarian aid from private sources.

However, sources in and out of government attribute improvements in the rebels' weapons to the CIA, which masks American involvement by supplying only Soviet and Chinese weapons, which are funneled through Pakistan to the various and often competing resistance groups.

A CIA director William Casey recently assured Sen. David Durenberger [R., Minn.], chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, that no more than 10 percent of the aid failed to reach the Afghan resistance groups. Still, the CIA has looked at alternate supply routes over which it would have greater control and has considered making secret air drops directly into Afghanistan to get supplies to the most isolated resistance groups.

Aside from the numbers, the Afghan supporters here complain about the quality of the arms received by the fighters. They are particularly concerned that the fighters get more antiaircraft weapons to use against the Soviet helicopter gunships, which have been particularly effective against the Afghan resistance.

Some complain that the weapons supplied have been old, unreliable or have lacked sufficient ammunition. The conservative Heritage Foundation said in a recent report

that many SAM-7s were worthless because of their high failure rate.

"The policy of trying to help the Afghan resistance with only Russian and Chinese equipment has been unsuccessful and should be changed," the Heritage report said.

Wilson faults the CIA for denying the primitive Afghan tribesmen the more modern military hardware—such as improved antiaircraft weapons, better mortars, armor-piercing ammunition for their 12.7 mm. heavy machine guns and communications equipment—that he said could make a major difference.

Prompted in part by Wilson, the CIA is said to be planning to supply the rebels this year with nine Swiss Erlikon 20 mm. antiaircraft cannon, to be used against planes and helicopters.

The Reagan administration says that the Mujahideen rebels, despite reports that they have done well in recent months, are not capable of ousting the Soviet forces. The Afghans have suffered considerable losses, according to the State Department, and can no longer depend on local villagers in many parts of the country where intense Soviet bombing has destroyed communities.

As a result, the administration has tried to move cautiously, concerned about maintaining "deniability" of the U.S. role, avoiding prodding the Soviets into further escalating the war, and creating problems for Pakistan. China and a number of Moslem countries, such as Saudi Arabia, have sent money and weapons to the Afghans.

Many supporters of the Afghans, particularly the foreign policy hawks, think Moscow can be forced to withdraw and they see little reason to maintain the fiction that the U.S. isn't involved in supporting the rebels—though Afghanistan is the one place in the world where American dollars are buying the guns and bullets that kill Soviet soldiers.

But many in Congress are troubled about what they say is an American policy that has sent the Afghans enough aid to fight and die, but not enough to have a realistic opportunity to prevail.

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